

AVIANO 2000 IN FULL THROTTLE

If things don't look the same, don't be surprised



by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts
photos by Master Sgt. Keith Reed

When Tech. Sgt. Travis Shultz arrived at Aviano Air Base, Italy, in 1997, he walked into a workplace with portable heaters and a leaky ceiling adorned with empty plastic bottles to catch drips of water. After work, he had to travel off base through wicked traffic to reach the base exchange that he'd circle at least 15 times in search of an elusive parking spot. The commissary was so small that only a limited number of customers were allowed in at a time.

Then the Aviano 2000 expansion program entered his life, and things were never the same again.

"We are extremely lucky to be assigned here," Sergeant Schultz said last summer before heading to an assignment at Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C. He had moved to Aviano just as the monumental upgrade was getting underway. "Every month it seems something new is coming online. This is great, but it's getting better all the time."

He said even those now arriving at Aviano must still stare in wonder at the landscape of building cranes and say to themselves, "Wow, I'm really in the middle of something big."

They are. Aviano 2000 boasts 286 projects with a \$565 million price tag stretching more than a decade of labor [See "Aviano's Renaissance," November 2000]. With a start date of 1995, Aviano 2000 is about 75 percent complete and should begin winding down in 2007, said Lt. Col. Peter Schwarz, chief of operation support for the project. The name Aviano

An Italian construction crew is at work in the early stages of the new hospital being built at Aviano Air Base, Italy. The hospital, part of the wide-sweeping changes included in the Aviano 2000 expansion program, will mean the end of the current temporary hospital arrangement the Air Force has with a nearby Italian hospital in late 2005. The architecture and landscaping keeps the style of that found in nearby villages at the foothills of the Alps in southern Italy.

2000 may imply to some the project is woefully behind schedule, but the name was intended to capture the spirit of a new millennium.

Set against a stunning backdrop of snowcapped mountains, brilliant blue skies and lush, green countryside, the style and architecture of the new buildings are in harmony with the local Italian culture. Terra cotta roof tiles and stone pathways make Aviano resemble a quaint Italian town more than a home for the 31st Fighter Wing and its fleet of F-16 Fighting Falcons.

"It will be one of the finest, if not the finest, base in the Air Force," Colonel Schwarz said. "I think

Tammaro Giovanni, an Italian construction worker, inspects shingles while overlooking a sea of change that has transformed Aviano into what one project officer said will be the premier base in the Air Force. Aviano 2000 is a transformation program that will last more than a decade before its completion nears around 2007.



Aviano should be at the top of all dream sheets."

Such grandeur would have seemed unimaginable in the early 1990s when Aviano was commonly referred to as a "sleepy hollow." That changed, however, with the closing of Torrejon Air Base, Spain, in 1994. NATO plans called for relocating the fighter wing to Crotona in southern Italy, but Congress voted not to fund construction of a new air base. Instead, the mission moved to Aviano.

When people and aircraft began arriving in April 1994, the transition doubled the base population. Soon after, the base became a hub for contingency operations during the Bosnian war, and the military population swelled to more than 4,000 people, including deployed airmen crowded in a tent city near an airfield brimming with more than 200 aircraft. For those permanently assigned, finding a house off base within a short commute to work became a quest for the Holy Grail. Then came Operation Al-

lied Force and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

However, the men and women of Aviano always stood poised and ready to support the mission, and the construction kept on rolling despite a few bumps in the road.

"It's exciting," said wing commander Brig. Gen. Mike Worden about the Aviano mission and rapid pace of base improvements. "I have the best job in the Air Force. I get to cut ribbons and not turn out lights and shut down buildings. It's really heartwarming to be part of growth and not stagnate," he said referring to base closures that were a trend of the past decade. Instead, he added, Aviano is a place where "you see cranes and buildings popping up like daisies."

Among buildings in full bloom are the new base exchange, fitness center, commissary, a school consolidating kindergarten through high school in one main area, collocated club and four modern dormitories.

Notable projects slated for completion this year include a 100-suite temporary lodging facility, youth activities center, post office, base theater and a full-day kindergarten.

But, the program has truly been a team effort. "A key element to the program's success is the strong partnership of the project management office, the 31st Civil Engineer Squadron, the Navy resident office in charge of construction and the Italian air force," said Lt. Col. Ken Polasek, the deputy program manager. "The resident office in charge of construction and the Italian air force are responsible for 33 operational facilities, including an engine test cell facility, avionics building and a control tower that should be complete later this year."

"We've had some outstanding high-visibility Aviano 2000 facilities open in 2003 which added greatly to the quality of life of Aviano community members," said Mike McGhee, chief of the Aviano 2000 project management branch. "This year will be even bigger and more exciting for the Aviano 2000 program team. And 2005 and 2006 will be just as big. You'd be hard pressed to recognize Aviano now even if you'd been stationed here three years ago. Come back in one to two years and you'll need a new map and a base orientation course." ☺

Filling the void Italian style

When some offices become uprooted during renovation or while a new building is under construction, airmen can usually unplug their computers and set up shop temporarily in whatever empty space is available.

But that wasn't the case with the 31st Medical Operations Squadron at Aviano Air Base, Italy, when the Aviano 2000 expansion plan called for a new hospital to open in 2005. In the meantime, the base still had to provide healthcare



to a base population that more than doubled when Aviano became the new home for the 31st Fighter Wing from Homestead Air Force Base, Fla.

The base had a clinic, but it needed a temporary hospital to fill the void. The solution was found by leasing space from an Italian hospital in the nearby picturesque town of Sacile, also known as "little Venice" because of its abundant waterways, bridges and Venetian architecture. Beginning in 1996, airmen and their families traveled about 12 miles away from the base to the hospital for treatment.

"We are probably enjoying more of the true Italian experience," said Maj. Mildred McGillvray-Hill, a chief nurse with the 31st. During the past few years Americans have exchanged pasta and apple pies with their Italian counterparts who have been responsive and supportive hosts, she added.

To make their patients feel more at home, the U.S. contingency has added amenities such as handrails in the hallways and — something the Italians envy — air conditioning. But for the Americans, there's something they'd like to take with them when their time comes to return to what Master Sgt. Heather Krell, also with the 31st, refers to as "the real world" — the view.

"There aren't too many hospitals in the United States with a view of the Alps," Major McGillvray-Hill said with a laugh as she looked outside the window at the stunning view of the Italian Alps.

— Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

Senior Airman James McKinney helps his wife,

Airman 1st Class Maria McKinney, with a sip of water during her stay in an Italian hospital in Sacile. The 31st Fighter Wing's medical staff set up temporary quarters there while awaiting completion of the new hospital as part of the Aviano 2000 program transforming "sleepy hollow" into a premier air base. Airman McKinney said her stay was pleasant and that the care of the medical staff made the location of her medical care transparent.